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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 000334

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KJUS](#) [AM](#)  
SUBJECT: "OPPOSITION" DASHNAKS CONFIDENT ABOUT MAYORAL  
ELECTION?

REF: A. YEREVAN 321  
[1](#)B. YEREVAN 278

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Classified By: AMB Marie L. Yovanovitch, reasons 1.4 (b/d)

SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (C) The leadership of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation - Dashnaktsutun (Dashnaks) told the Ambassador that they are confident of their chances in the upcoming May 31 municipal election that will determine Yerevan's next mayor. They said that in spite of having recently exited the ruling coalition, the Dashnaks have always worked to "support political minorities" in Armenia and will have credibility running an opposition campaign. Their main concerns are taking on the two senior partners of the ruling coalition, who they claimed are illegally using administrative resources to get an advantage in the election. The Dashnaks said if they win, they have ambitious plans for reforming the municipality, including giving it an active foreign policy role. END SUMMARY.

SOUNDING A POSITIVE TONE -- OR NOT?  
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[1](#)2. (C) On May 6 the Ambassador met with five leaders of the Dashnak party to learn more about their decision to bolt the ruling coalition (septel) and how they were preparing for the upcoming Yerevan municipal election on May 31. They leaders include Vahan Hovhannisian, the party's faction leader in parliament; Armen Rustamian, an MP and the head of the Dashnaks' "Supreme Council" in Armenia; Artsvik Minasian, an MP and member of the parliament's Ad Hoc Committee on the March 1 events; Lilit Galstian, an MP and member of the Dashnaks' Supreme Council; and Ara Nranian, a young MP.

[1](#)3. (C) When asked about the Dashnaks' chances as a new opposition party that is contesting the May 31 election, Hovhannisian boasted, "I think our list will be invincible with Artsvik Minasian leading it." (Note: Hovhannisian ran for president in 2008 and netted a disappointing six percent of the vote. Party insiders told Emboffs (ref A) that the Dashnak leadership approached Hovhannisian and Rustamian to lead their ticket once again, but both refused and favored instead putting forward a young, fresh candidate. End Note) That said, Hovhannisian confided that "I am not sure what we will have in one month's time. If I'm living in a 'democracy,' why should I have doubts about the conduct of the election?"

REPUBLICANS, PROSPEROUS ARMENIA STAND IN THE WAY  
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14. (C) The 37-year-old Minasian, who has come of political age over the last year thanks to his visible role on the parliament's Ad Hoc Commission on March 1 events and his personal monitoring of the controversial "Trial of Seven" court hearings, told the Ambassador the only thing standing in the way of a Dashnak victory is the senior partners of the ruling coalition -- the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) and Prosperous Armenia (PA). He said the two parties are unfairly using the administrative resources at their disposal, as well as overwhelming financial means, to "pressure" voters.

15. (SBU) While the Dashnaks were still in the ruling coalition, Minasian on April 1 made a bold, public appeal to President Sargsian, asking him to publicly promise that his RPA would not use government resources in the election. The appeal came after reports that the RPA candidate for mayor, current mayor Gagik Beglarian, was starting to use government levers to pressure state employees to vote for the RPA. President Sargsian never responded to Minasian. Then, on April 17, Minasian threatened a complete Dashnak pull-out of the coalition if the election is marred by "blatant" irregularities. (Note: The Dashnaks did pull out of the coalition ten days later, but for foreign policy reasons rather than concerns over the election. End Note.)

16. (C) Minasian and Hovhannisian also decried the "black" public relations campaign that had been launched against the Dashnaks after their exit from the coalition by the Armenian National Congress led by ex-President Levon Ter-Petrossian. Minasian alleged that ANC canvassers in recent days had been going door-to-door telling residents that Minasian was ineligible to run in the election because he is not registered in Yerevan, which Minasian said was preposterous.

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(Note: Others have also pointed out to us that coverage on government-controlled TV of the Dashnaks has become less positive since they bolted the government. End Note.)

HOPING FOR SUPPORT OF HERITAGE  
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17. (C) Minasian and Rustamian revealed that the Dashnaks were in negotiations with the leadership of the Heritage party -- the lone opposition party in parliament until the Dashnaks joined them on April 27 (ref B). (Note: Heritage in mid-March decided not to run in the election (ref A), after failed negotiations with the ANC that resulted in mutual recriminations. Heritage publicly stated it would support the opposition in the election, but did not mention ANC by name. End Note) Rustamian said that while Heritage had yet to make up its mind, they and the Dashnaks had at least agreed that "we will work together as an opposition" during the elections, and "not resort to extremes." Rustamian emphasized that Heritage had decided not to unite with ANC for the election. (Comment: On May 12, senior leaders of the Heritage party told Emboffs that Heritage was not going to endorse the Dashnaks' election campaign, with one of them scoffing, "what opposition -- they just left the coalition." End Comment)

COME ON -- ARE DASHNAKS REALLY OPPOSITION?  
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18. (C) When the Ambassador asked whether the Dashnaks would be able to get enough traction as a bona fide opposition party before the fast-approaching election, the leaders replied that the Dashnaks had taken plenty of positions in the past that were in direct opposition to its former ruling coalition partners. Without precisely elaborating these, Hovhannisian enumerated democracy and human rights, social issues, the economy and a level playing field in business as areas where "we have had differences." Rustamian added that the Dashnaks had advocated an amnesty for all of the people

detained surrounding the March 1 events, but "nobody supported us on this."

¶9. (C) Lilit Galstian stated that the Dashnaks have "always worked to improve the rights of political minorities" in Armenia, and cited the Dashnaks' support of late 2008 changes to parliamentary procedures that gave the Heritage party a greater voice to debate legislation, more seats on parliamentary committees, and the offer of chairing some committees (the last of which Heritage refused). (Comment: Heritage has seven MPs in the 131-member unicameral parliament, with the ruling coalition having 110 MPs before the 16 Dashnaks officially bolted the coalition on April 27. The new rules cited by Galstian were essentially introduced as a symbolic gesture taken after the March 1 events, in order to raise the profile of the minuscule opposition. In reality, the imbalance of pro-government and opposition forces in parliament lie elsewhere, namely in the wide-scale fraud and vote-tampering that perennially mar Armenia's elections, and which result in the opposition being crowded out altogether, or intentionally kept small. End Comment.)

#### LITTLE ON CAMPAIGN STRATEGY, BUT LOTS OF GOALS

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¶10. (C) When asked by the Ambassador what their campaign strategy was, Minasian obliquely replied that their campaign would be "normal in coverage and scope." He said that one of their campaign slogans was "Replant Yerevan Anew," and they accordingly kicked off their campaign on May 2 with a tree-planting ceremony. Minasian said the overarching goal of the Dashnaks election campaign is to "strengthen and crystallize" the opposition in order to make it a strong counterbalance to the government. For example, he said that the Dashnaks had proposed that the government give oversight of the parliament's Control Chamber to the opposition. (Comment: The Control Chamber, which is a rough equivalent to the GAO in the United States, has traditionally been controlled by the parliament, so it is not directly tied to the municipal election results. End Comment.) Referencing parliament again, Minasian said the Dashnaks would strive to ensure all staffing in the parliament was based on professional qualifications and ethics, and not party affiliation as it currently is.

¶11. (C) Turning to the 65 Yerevan City Council seats up for grabs on May 31, Minasian said a Dashnak victory would result in the creation of an "Ombudsman" institution specifically for Yerevan and the formation of public councils in all of

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Yerevan's 12 communities. Minasian also stated the Dashnaks would ensure political rights are respected in Yerevan, to include the right of assembly, so that "no unnecessary requirements are imposed on campaign rallies." Minasian said the Dashnaks would give the Yerevan mayor's office an active role in Armenian foreign policy initiatives, expand the municipality's contacts with Diaspora communities overseas, and help the Diaspora establish offices in Yerevan.

#### COMMENT

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¶12. (C) When engaging the Dashnak leadership, one often comes away feeling they have the country's best interests at heart. Their decade-long alliance with the authorities -- which has supposedly now ended -- has shown, however, that the Dashnaks also have a strong desire to be part of the ruling regime. There are many in Yerevan who expect the Dashnaks' turn in the political wilderness will not last for long. The government, meanwhile, has been quick to point out to foreign critics that the Dashnak departure from the government makes clear that the Armenian political process is a democratic one.

¶13. (C) It is doubtful that the party can effectively shed

its old mantle for the new, and in the space of a month run a credible opposition campaign. While the up-and-coming Minasian might net them a bit more than the six percent Hovhannisian got in his presidential run (and the seven percent threshold required for parties to qualify for seats on the council), it is safe to assume that they will continue to remain a second-string player -- whether inside or outside the ruling regime.

YOVANOVITCH